

Sufficiently Well Informed and Seriously Concerned? European Union Policy Responses to Marginalisation, Structural Racism, and Institutionalised Exclusion in Early Childhood

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Throughout the European Union, children from marginalised communities experience an appalling reality of poverty, exclusion, discrimination, and racism. Growing up in poverty and social exclusion shapes the reality of the lived experience for an increasing number of children in one of the wealthiest regions of the world. In the UK, a member of the G7, a significant number of children suffer from hunger, malnutrition, and cold (Lansley & Mack, 2015) while the government has abandoned child poverty reduction targets; in Croatia, a recent accession to the EU, “it is normal that Roma children are mostly sick, with diarrhoea, bronchitis, vomiting” according to a recently published report (Šikić-Mićanović, Ivatts, Vojak, & Geiger-Zeman, 2015, p. 42). Rather than examining the situation in specific countries, in this paper I undertake a critical inquiry into policy approaches and responses to inequality at the level of the European Union—including the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies—with a specific focus on early childhood education, care, and development. However, while the policies put in place by the European Union have to be welcomed, they represent only one aspect of a complex and often contradictory picture. Perspectives from professionals and activists working “on the ground” are necessary to complement the official picture; they will be presented and discussed in order to identify systemic challenges. I conclude by making the case for a radical systemic turn in EU early childhood policies and for learning with and from experiences in so-called developing countries as a way forward to address these challenges.

Dans l'ensemble de l'Union européenne, les enfants de communautés marginalisées affrontent une réalité épouvantable caractérisée par la pauvreté, l'exclusion, la discrimination et le racisme. Grandir dans la pauvreté et l'exclusion sociale façonne le vécu d'un nombre croissant d'enfants dans une des régions les plus riches du monde. Au Royaume-Uni, état membre du G7, un nombre significatif d'enfants souffrent de la faim, de malnutrition et du froid (Lansley & Mack, 2015) et pourtant, le gouvernement a abandonné ses objectifs de réduction de la pauvreté chez les enfants. En Croatie, dont l'adhésion à l'Union européenne est récente, et selon un rapport publié récemment (Šikić-Mićanović, Ivatts, Vojak, & Geiger-Zeman, 2015, p. 42) «il est normal que les enfants roms soient surtout malades de la diarrhée, la bronchite, des vomissements». Plutôt que d'examiner la situation dans des pays spécifiques, j'adopte une enquête critique des approches et des réponses politiques face à l'inégalité à l'échelle de l'Union européenne, y compris le cadre de l'UE pour les stratégies nationales d'intégration des Roms, et

en me penchant plus particulièrement sur l'éducation, les soins et le développement de la petite enfance. Toutefois, si les politiques mises en place par l'Union européenne doivent être bien accueillies, elles ne représentent qu'un aspect d'un ensemble complexe et souvent contradictoire. Les perspectives de professionnels et de militants œuvrant « sur le terrain » sont nécessaires pour compléter le tableau officiel, et elles seront présentées et discutées de sorte à identifier des problèmes systémiques. Je conclus en plaidant en faveur d'un virage systémique et radical dans les politiques de l'UE sur la petite enfance, et en conseillant que l'on s'inspire des expériences dans les pays dits en développement pour faire face à ces défis.

Third World Conditions in Europe

EU policy documents suggest that participation in “high quality” early childhood education and care is key to addressing marginalisation of Roma children (Council of the European Union, 2011). The—admittedly uncomfortable—question I aim to raise in this paper is whether the kind of early childhood education we provide, instead of being a solution, is caught up in what I call (and will discuss in more detail further down) a *paradox of good intentions*.

The above-mentioned report on the situation of Roma children in Croatia is the most recent in a series of country reports produced and published by the Roma Early Childhood Inclusion (RECI) project. RECI is a joint initiative of the Open Society Foundations (OSF), UNICEF, and the Roma Education Fund (REF). The rationale behind the initiative is the recognition of a stark discrepancy between political rhetoric and “lived experience” for Roma children and families in present-day Europe. All EU Member States have ratified the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which makes its implementation a legal obligation. Moreover, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union specifically refers to children's rights. Specifically, as Article 24(2) of the Charter outlines, “In all actions relating to children, whether taken by public authorities or private institutions, the child's best interests must be a primary consideration” (European Union, 2000). However, as the authors of the Roma Early Childhood Inclusion reports remind us,

the majority of poor Roma children face a challenging present and a difficult future. Their possibilities to succeed in life are severely constrained by prevailing negative attitudes towards their families and communities. From the very start of life, Roma children have reduced opportunities to develop to their full potential. (Bennett, 2012, p. 9)

How do “reduced opportunities to develop one's potential” manifest in everyday experiences? They become concrete in the voices of a parent and a teacher, as evident from interviews conducted in a Roma community in 2013. A father explained,

Our children can't be clean and tidy when they go to school; where can I bathe my child ... there's a flood in my house. How? What if my child gets pneumonia? I didn't have children for them to get sick. (Šikić-Mićanović et al, 2015, p. 52).

A school principal indicated similar concerns:

if there are no conditions at home for doing homework, if seven of them live in a small space. Everything is done there—the cooking, baking, smoking, changing babies, sleeping ... all seven of

them! How can a child learn and be at peace? What else do I have to say? Which factors have an impact on their development? I have mentioned enough—poverty, malnutrition, [and] hunger ... (Šikić-Mićanović et al., 2015, p. 80)

The EU Framework for a National Roma Integration Strategies Aim and the Scope of the Framework

I owe the first part of the title of this paper to an e-mail exchange with my colleague Arthur Ivatts (2015) who is arguably the most experienced advocate for Roma inclusion in Europe. It is his observation, based on rich experience (and a healthy dose of cynicism), that a flurry of activity at the EU policy level can leave the impression that EU policy makers as well as international organisations are “pro-Roma and *sufficiently well informed* to be *seriously concerned* [emphasis added] about the situation of Roma (including Gypsies and Travellers).” “They all say the right things” he concludes, but “none of them really take serious issue with any government” (A. Ivatts, personal communication, 2015). This exchange, and my own experience in early childhood policy, research, and practice, made me want to take a closer look at some of the policies that frame our work.

In the light of persistent marginalisation and exclusion of Roma peoples in Europe, the European Union in 2011 adopted a Union-wide strategy to address and monitor the fragmented and in many cases ineffective social inclusion policies of individual member states. *The EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies* (NRIS) (European Commission, 2011b) can be read as a (late!) realization and acceptance at EU level that the situation has become untenable. The document starts with the following acknowledgement:

Many of the estimated 10-12 million Roma in Europe face prejudice, intolerance, discrimination and social exclusion in their daily lives. They are marginalised and live in very poor socio-economic conditions. This is not acceptable in the European Union (EU) at the beginning of the 21st century. (European Commission, 2011b, p. 2)

The marginalisation of Roma across one of the most affluent regions of the world had been sharply criticised by international organisations (e.g. OECD, World Bank, UNICEF) as well as advocacy groups (e.g. European Network Against Racism [ENAR]), albeit for different reasons. While the OECD and World Bank tend to point out the socioeconomic cost(s) of endemic poverty, and the potential macroeconomic gains from higher educational achievement and, in consequence, a higher qualified and more productive and workforce (OECD, 2008; World Bank, 2010), actors like UNICEF and ENAR have emphasised the continued denial of basic human rights, individual and collective, to members of minority groups, most prominently Roma people (European Network Against Racism, 2012). Reports produced by the Fundamental Rights Agency (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights [FRA], 2009; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights [FRA] & United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2012) show that marginalisation, exclusion, and structural racism are by no means limited to specific countries or regions. They are a reality across the entire European Union (Murray, 2012). Against this background, the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies (NRIS) is a welcome and overdue acknowledgement that coordinated action is needed at both national and EU levels. *The Framework* requires Member States to develop comprehensive approaches to tackling discrimination across four “key policy areas”—education (including early childhood education), employment, healthcare and housing. The declared aim is to “ensure that

national, regional and local integration policies focus on Roma in a clear and specific way, and address the needs of Roma with explicit measures to prevent and compensate for disadvantages they face” (European Commission, 2011b, p. 4).

What makes the NRIS stand out against other EU policies is its implicit endorsement of affirmative action. Within a general human rights/fundamental rights framework (European Union, 2000), the NRIS rejects the idea that equality can be achieved by treating everybody the same. This is a widespread misconception especially in relation to young children, as we have discussed in detail elsewhere (Murray & Urban, 2012). Instead, the NRIS takes a rights-based approach and states as its aim that

Member States need to ensure that Roma are not discriminated against but treated like any other EU citizens with equal access to all fundamental rights as enshrined in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. In addition, action is needed to break the vicious cycle of poverty moving from one generation to the next. (European Commission, 2011b, p. 2)

It is not my aim for this paper to provide a detailed analysis of the conceptualisations and beliefs that underpin the policies that manifest in the NRIS. Rather, I am going to focus on its implications for young children and their families and, more specifically, on early childhood education and care (ECEC) and the attention this policy area receives in the strategy. Nevertheless, before moving into an overview of the achievements and challenges of the NRIS in relation to early childhood, it is important to point out that the framework, from my point of view, contains a number of conceptual weaknesses that, if not addressed openly, will undermine its chances of achieving its goals. Particular risks arise from the fundamental concepts of the document as cited above: Human rights for Roma, and the intergenerational cycle of poverty.¹ Neither of these conceptualizations is specific to the *Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies*. They feature prominently in most recent EU social and education policy documents and, unfortunately, are hardly ever subject to critical discussion. The fundamental questions that arise from these taken for granted aims—rights and poverty alleviation—are questions about the addressees of the framework: Who is it for? What course of action should be taken and by whom? Who is empowered in the process; who is expected to change and who is ignored? I will come back to these questions because how we position ourselves in relation to them has implications for early childhood practices, policies, and research at every level of the system.

Achievements and Challenges: The Official Picture

The key feature of the NRIS is that it is supposed to serve as a coordinating framework for Roma Integration Strategies at the level of each Member State of the European Union. Therefore, when the EU framework was adopted in Malta in 2011, all EU Member States presented national Roma Integration Strategies that follow the structure and key policy areas of the EU framework.² In addition to the actual *Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies*, the EU adopted recommendations and guidance for the implementation of National Integration policies (Council of the European Union, 2013), provided funding,³ and put in place a monitoring process. The Commission follows the progress made by countries in the four key areas—education, employment, healthcare and housing—and has documented progress in three (at the time of writing) assessment reports (European Commission, 2012, 2013b, 2014b).

According to a 2014 staff working document (European Commission, 2014a) that

accompanies the most recent assessment, across the entire framework results for the first three years are mixed at best:

Although positive steps have been taken in most Member States to address the situation of Roma in education, employment, health, housing as well as non-discrimination, further and more consolidated efforts are still needed to change the situation of Roma in Europe. The monitoring mechanism should have a stronger focus on assessing the impact and the conclusions of the monitoring should be channelled into policy development. (European Commission, 2014a, p. 2)

The framework situates early childhood in the key area of education. A closer look at the steps taken by countries in this area, and the Commission's assessment of the measures, reveals a number of critical issues that, as I will argue, are symptomatic of a systemic crisis of policy approaches to support systems for marginalised young children and their families across Europe.

The Commission document examines progress in the key policy areas of NRIS under two categories— “Key steps since 2011” and “Assessment”—which I equate roughly with achievements and challenges for the purpose of this paper. The terms “early childhood,” “pre-school,” “preschool,” or “kindergarten” are mentioned 32 times in combination within the entire document.⁴ At first glance, achievements and challenges in relation to early childhood education appear to be almost evenly balanced across EU countries in the Commission document: 15 achievements against 17 challenges. However, a first and striking imbalance lies in the way early childhood is positioned in the framework. With one exception, early childhood related terms appear only in the sections on education. The only connection between early childhood and health is made in the case of Hungary; early childhood does not feature once under housing and employment.

This in itself is an important finding. It points to a persistent deficit in systemic thinking in EU early childhood policies. Unfortunately, it is also in line with other recent EU policy developments that prioritize formal education and preparation for primary school over care and holistic development. The implications of this (re)turn to the schoolification of early childhood cannot be underestimated. Orienting early childhood services towards a narrow education agenda means setting them up for failure, at least in relation to ambitious policy goals that make direct links between increased “participation” in early childhood education and the success of the European project: “Only by addressing the needs of those at risk of social exclusion can the objectives of the Strategic Framework be properly met” (Council of the European Union, 2010). A further, even more worrying implication of the emphasis on narrow conceptualizations of formal education for young children is that they contribute to what Kathleen Lynch (2010) calls the educational “culture of carelessness, grounded in rationalism [and] exacerbated by new managerialism” (p. 54). I have discussed this in more detail elsewhere (Urban, 2015b).

If we stay, for the moment, within the suggested framework, questions arise about the characteristics of perceived achievements and challenges. According to the Commission document, progress has been made in a number of generic areas including the introduction of compulsory preschool (e.g. in Bulgaria, Finland, or Hungary), the closing of segregated Traveller preschools (Ireland), in relation to a number of unspecified “measures focusing on early-childhood education, primary and secondary education (Latvia)” and a worrying introduction of ‘incentives’ to ‘enforce’ preschool education (Poland) (European Commission, 2014a, pp. 9, 19, 26, 28, 32, 39).

Within the NRIS, the challenges appear to concentrate in three areas:

1. Access to early childhood education of high quality for Roma children.
 - e.g. Bulgaria: “More efforts are needed to effectively ensure access to good quality early childhood education and care to all Roma children, by creating the necessary capacities and ensuring qualified staff” (p. 9).
 - e.g. Czech Republic: “Ensuring access to, and promoting participation of, Roma children in quality inclusive pre-school education needs to be reinforced” (p. 14).
2. The need to overcome persistent segregation.
 - e.g. Greece: “Desegregation measures need to be reinforced” (p. 24).
 - e.g. Latvia: “Systematic measures to reinforce desegregation and inclusion into mainstream education are needed, starting with ensuring access to quality-inclusive early childhood education and care” (p. 32).
3. Sustainability and upscaling of successful early childhood programmes.
 - e.g. Romania: “Initiatives undertaken should be scaled up and secured by adequate and sustainable funding. In particular, programmes aimed at providing access to good quality early childhood education and care ... should be expanded” (p. 41).
 - e. g. Romania: “A wide number of small projects targeted at the most disadvantaged including the Roma (e.g. summer schools, school projects on tolerance, attention to disadvantaged families in kindergartens, work with parents and pupils to fight early school leaving, etc” (p. 41).

Needless to say that this is only a rough and by no means in-depth analysis of the situation, based on the necessarily condensed perspective of the 2014 *Commission Staff Working Document* (European Commission, 2014a). However, even a cursory reading of the document points to a number of systemic challenges that, I argue, have to be addressed if the hope of the transformatory power of early childhood education is to become “historical concreteness” (Freire, 2004). These challenges include

- The realisation that over the period of reporting only one country (Spain) has made “significant progress regarding Roma education” (European Commission, 2014a, p. 47).
- Capacity: a persistent lack of qualified, experienced and well-paid educators across almost all Member States.
- Inequality of access: while a lot of progress has been made, having access to early childhood services remains a critical issue for children from Roma communities across Europe. To give just one example, recent data from Croatia shows that only 20% of children from Roma communities have access to any kind of early childhood education service (Šikić-Mićanović et al., 2015).
- Persistent segregation: despite important changes to legislation and regulation in most Member States, de facto segregation from children from the dominant groups in society remains a reality for children from marginalised groups
- Mismatch between enrolment and participation and general lack of data: despite the declared aim to “increase participation” in early childhood education, the information that is

available (if at all) usually refers to enrolment figures (Dumčius et al., 2012). There is a persistent misconception that formal enrolment in an early childhood programme equals meaningful participation. Hardly any data is available on the latter.

- Sustainability: a seemingly unbreakable cycle of short-term initiatives and projects that hardly ever move to a stage where, following thorough evaluation, their successes are implemented on a larger scale.

The Paradox of Good Intentions

Underlying the EU policy approach to marginalised groups is another, and particularly difficult, issue. I call this the paradox of good intentions. Although it can be found in any policy area, including education or social policy, the paradox has specific implications for early childhood policy and practice. Policies grounded in the paradox of good intentions are based on a genuine will to provide solutions for a particular problem, or set of problems. More often than not, these solutions are based on a thorough analysis of the “problem,” supported by research evidence, and accompanied by a real commitment to do something about it. A good example for how this may look like can be found in the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies, and its commitment to fundamental rights:

First of all, Member States need to ensure that Roma are not discriminated against but treated like any other EU citizens with equal access to all fundamental rights as enshrined in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. In addition, action is needed to break the vicious cycle of poverty moving from one generation to the next. (European Commission, 2011b, p. 2)

It is hard to disagree with the good intention of this statement that provides the justification for the EU taking the initiative and providing guidance for Member States on how to alleviate the situation. The Commission, too, should be trusted in their genuine commitment to realising the fundamental rights of all EU citizens. Unfortunately, this is exactly where the paradox comes into play. In the case of the above statement that orients EU policy towards Roma, there are two paradoxical elements, which in turn have significant implications for initiatives developed on the basis of the original framework. First, it is of course right to insist that Roma are “treated like any other EU citizen.” Paradoxically however, in saying so the document reinforces the fact that Roma are not like all EU citizens. They are, the statement inadvertently implies, different and not like us.

Second, there is the laudable intention to “break the vicious cycle of poverty moving from one generation to the next.” Breaking the cycle of poverty is a concept that figures in many EU policy documents, prominently so in all recent policies relating to early childhood education (e.g. Council of the European Union, 2011; European Commission, 2011a, 2013a; Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2014). Education in general, and “participation in high quality early childhood education and care” (Council of the European Union, 2010, 2011) are seen as key policy tools to achieving this goal. Here, the paradox of good intentions manifests in the implicit self-referential conceptualisation of “poverty”: seen as intergenerational cycle poverty becomes an intrinsic characteristic of the poor, to which they actively contribute (moving from one generation to the next). Such a conceptualisation deflects from understandings of poverty as inevitable (and, for some, desirable and beneficial) condition

of capitalist society. It prevents us from asking questions about social, political, and economic conditions that produce and maintain poverty and from asking questions about who benefits from and thrives on sustained poverty and exclusion in society. Most critically, as I have argued elsewhere (Urban, 2015b), the persistent focus on the cycles of poverty and disadvantage prevent us from shifting our attention—and policies—to the cycles of unfair advantage that are just as persistent in society. The two are mutually dependent, in a relationship of cause and effect. They are no opposites, rather one twisted surface of a Moebius Strip. ⁵The self-referential conceptualisation of poverty and exclusion is closely linked to the construction of the poor and the excluded as different from the dominant group in society—they and us, the generalised Other. Othering and blaming the victim always go hand in hand.

The problem with the paradox of good intentions is that it is hard to point out its counterproductive aspects without appearing unfairly critical of the motives behind the policies in question. This (another paradox?) is not my intention. Rather, my argument is that we are facing an urgent need to explore new ways of engaging with each other in complex, hyper-diverse (Tasan-Kok, van Kempen, Raco, & Bolt, 2013) societies, based on respect for diversity and democratic values. The challenge is two-fold: old and established dichotomies no longer provide viable ground for “solutions.” Only addressing one aspect of a complex and multi-faceted situation (e.g. breaking poverty cycles through early childhood education) won’t work either. Philosopher and feminist writer Rosi Braidotti puts it this way:

Present day Europe is struggling with multiculturalism at a time of increasing racism and xenophobia. The paradoxes, power dissymmetries and fragmentations of the present historical context rather require that we shift the political debate from the issue of differences between cultures to differences within the same culture. In other words, one of the features of our present historical condition is the shifting grounds on which periphery and centre confront each other, with a new level of complexity which defies dualistic or oppositional thinking. (Braidotti, 2002, p. 14)

Roma Integration Policies: The View from the Ground

In this section I want to move on from what can be seen as the official view on the state of the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies and introduce a ground up perspective. A lot of what follows is based on conversations with experts, activists, and colleagues from NGOs working with Roma in different EU countries locally and across the EU. Their personal and professional experience tells a story that is very different from the analysis presented by the EU Commission. The accounts of people working “on the ground” with Roma communities and projects point to a remarkable gap between EU policy and their perceived impact on local communities. They are often presented with a good dose of cynicism about the motives behind EU policies. As one very experienced colleague and distinguished expert on Roma integration put it, “if they hung ten Roma every day in Prague the Czech Republic would still be admitted to the EU” (personal communication, 2014). This statement refers to the discrepancy, perceived by many practitioners, between rhetoric and action in relation to human rights and equality. While there is an acknowledgment that the EU has made significant funds available for new member states (“The PHARE ⁶ funding programme threw money at Roma integration projects”), the focus of the criticism is that the EU appears to operate what some call a “light touch approach” when it comes to following through on human rights. One prominent example for this is the case of “D. H. and others” taken against the Czech Republic in the context

of persistent enforced segregation of children from Roma families into education programmes for “mentally disabled” children.” In 2000, a group of 18 Roma students from the Ostrava region in the Czech Republic, who had been assigned to special schools for children with learning difficulties because of their ethnicity, took their case to the European Court on Human Rights. After lengthy proceedings and an appeal, the Court ruled in favour of the complainants in 2007 and found that they had suffered from discrimination by the Czech Republic and had been denied their right to education (European Roma Rights Centre, 2015). However, despite what has been called a “landmark decision” (see below) the situation on the ground remains problematic. According to an assessment by the Open Society Foundation (OSF), little has changed since the decision by the Court on Human Rights:

Despite this landmark decision, there has been little change: the “special schools” have been renamed but still follow the same substandard curriculum; Roma continue to be assigned to these schools in disproportionate numbers; and attempts to challenge the biased attitudes of teachers and parents have been minimal. The process of integration has barely begun. (Open Society Foundations, 2012)

The ruling in the “D. H.” case dates back to 2007; the EU remained inactive for seven years following the decision. Only in 2014 did the EU begin to take infringement proceedings against the Czech Republic. Yet, the development of an “Action plan of measures to execute the Judgement of the European Court of Human Rights” around the case is listed in the Commission’s 2014 assessment under achievements, specifically, “key steps taken since 2011” (European Commission, 2014a, p. 14).

The ‘D. H.’ case is only one example of the “light touch approach” to human rights and of the hesitance to taking action. In the light of systematic violations of human rights of minority groups in many EU Member States, the EU brought the *Racial Equality Directive* (RED) (Council Directive 2000/43/EC of 29 June 2000) into force. According to an analysis undertaken by Amnesty International in 2013, “no proceeding has been opened ... against member states whose policies or practices discriminate against the Roma” (New Europe, 2013). It was not until 2015, five years after the RED came into force, is the EU considering infringement procedures against countries found in breach of EU law (e.g. Czech Republic, Slovakia).

What’s in a Name?

EU policy documents referring to Roma generally have a footnote on page one. It explains that for the purpose of this and other documents the term “Roma” is used as an umbrella term that encompasses a number of ethnic minority groups. This is the wording used in the opening paragraph of the 2011 *Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies*:

The term “Roma” is used—similarly to other political documents of the European Parliament and the European Council—as an umbrella which includes groups of people who have more or less similar cultural characteristics, such as Sinti, Travellers, Kalé, Gens du voyage, etc. whether sedentary or not; around 80% of Roma are estimated to be sedentary (European Commission, 2011b, p. 2)

As Murray (2012) observes, the introduction of one overarching term for a highly diverse group of peoples may be “efficient or handy ... at policy level to describe a group of people of similar

characteristics” (p. 570). I tend to read Murray’s observation about the implications of such an umbrella term as another example of the paradox of good intentions. She writes, “while it is clear that this is in no way used to marginalise, it can have unintended consequences at national and local levels’ (Murray, 2012, p. 570). These “unintended consequences” can have far reaching implications in two areas—political clout and collective identity. First, subsuming diverse groups under one term can contribute to fragmentation and, in consequence, weakening of minority representation. One example for this, drawn from the Irish context, is that organisations representing Travellers can be excluded from policy meetings concerning Roma. Second, using one group as umbrella term for all can imply a hierarchy (of oppression, need, political attention) and reinforce destructive patterns of internalised oppression (Freire, 2000):

if you’re not named you can be excluded and marginalised within the very category in which you are identified. For Travellers, Sinti, Manush, etc. it can also assume a hierarchy (i.e. Travellers seen as sub-group of Roma) and can, in some circumstances, lead to the further non-recognition and exclusion of Travellers or Roma, Manush, Sinti, Ashkali, Dom and Lom at European and national and NGO discussions. Setting groups against each other needs to be avoided and proactively addressed. (Murray, 2012, p. 570)

Cui Bono? Advocacy as a Systemic Challenge

One question that continues to come up in conversations with practitioners focuses on the actual or perceived beneficiaries of EU initiatives to support Roma integration in Europe. Highly critical views are expressed about EU funding having lead to the creation of what some call an “advocacy industry”. The term refers to the considerable numbers of agencies and experts that have sprung up in the context of EU engagement with minority groups, turning representation into a profession, a livelihood—or, as some say, into a business. Concerns are that in order to compete for limited resources, NGO’s are too often pursuing very specific and sectoral interests. The perceived need to develop and present a distinct profile can add to the impression that advocacy is fragmented and that organizations represent conflicting views instead of unity. This, as one colleague told me, is easily and sometimes systematically exploited by national governments that are reluctant to take serious action towards integration and human rights in the first place: “it allows them [governments, M.U.] to say ‘they [NGOs, M.U.] do not know what they want’ or ‘if they only had one voice we could meet with them and work with them’” (personal communication). Thus, paradoxically, the struggle for genuine representation of the diversity of marginalised groups can effectively be undermined and prevented from achieving its aim.

A second counterproductive aspect of the professionalization and fragmentation of advocacy is that it results in short-termism. Finding themselves in the reality of the current competitive (EU) funding context, NGOs are constantly pursuing comparatively small amounts of money for short-term projects that are hardly ever given the opportunity to evolve and build on the experience gathered. In consequence, this leads to a lot of “reinventing the wheel” and prevents upscaling of successful initiatives.

It would be easy to criticise individual NGO’s, experts and professionals for putting self-interest before the interest of the children, families, and communities they represent. In fact, the view that professionals benefit from the existence of the very social problem they supposedly set out to resolve—and hence have an interest in maintaining the status quo—is not new. Jona

Rosenfeld, writing in the context of social work, has identified exactly this professional bias as one of the key elements leading to what he calls “inapt services” (Rosenfeld & Sykes, 1998). My argument here is that the fragmentation that results in maintaining the oppressive status quo for children and families from marginalised communities is a systemic—and, one might suspect, systematic—failure of governments at national level, implicitly encouraged by a lack of systemic thinking at EU level. It is not unusual that the fragmented picture at the level of funders is met with a lack of interest and structural incompetence at the level of local or regional government, as documented below by an activist for the case of Romania: very few counties in Romania have a strategy ... Mismanagement of pre-accession funds had a negative impact on human resources, lack of quali

fied staff bei

(Mihailescu, 2013). At both EU and Member State levels the pattern of competitive, short term funding for disconnected initiatives effectively obscures public responsibility for realising human rights and for implementing and monitoring existing legislation.

Towards Competent Systems: The Case for a Radical Systemic Turn in Early Childhood Policy and Practice

The European Union has a long history of addressing early childhood at policy level, from the 1992 *Council Recommendation on Childcare* (Council of the European Communities, 1992) to the 2014 *Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care* (Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2014). As I have discussed in detail elsewhere, the conceptualisation of services for young children and their families—who they are for and what purpose they serve—has developed considerably over these two decades (Urban, 2012, 2015b). The most remarkable progress, in the context of this paper, is the conceptual transformation from childcare (a commodity for working parents) to early-childhood-education-and care (ECEC, as early childhood services are referred to in EU policy documents since 2010). In policy terms this means a shift from a purely economic agenda—enabling women to join the labour market in order to increase economic competitiveness—to an acknowledgement of education as key tool to achieving even broader macro political goals:

high quality ECEC is beneficial for all children, but particularly for those with a socioeconomically disadvantaged, migrant or Roma background, or with special educational needs, including disabilities. By helping to close the achievement gap and supporting cognitive, linguistic, social and emotional development, it can help to break the cycle of disadvantage and disengagement that often lead to early school leaving and to the transmission of poverty from one generation to the next. (Council of the European Union, 2010)

The close link between early childhood education and the realisation of Europe 2020, which is the overall strategic framework of the European Union, is reiterated in the most recent (at the time of writing) EU early childhood document:

high quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) is an essential foundation for all children's successful lifelong learning, social integration, personal development and later employability. Improving the quality and effectiveness of ECEC systems across the EU is essential to securing smart, sustainable and inclusive economic growth. (Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2014, p. 3)

The shift in focus is embedded in a broader narrative about the promise of high social and economic returns of investments in children. This narrative continues to be promoted by influential international agents including OECD (2009, 2012) and World Bank (2009, 2011). It is a narrative as powerful as it is contested. A necessary substantial critique of the return-on-investment argument is not within the scope of this paper. However, critical authors point out its narrowness, incredulity, lack of democratic legitimacy, and disrespect for children's rights—including the right to be respected as citizens and human beings in the here and now (Bloch, Swadener, & Cannella, 2014; Cannella, Slazar Pérez, & Lee, 2016; Moss, 2007, 2009, 2014; Moss & Urban, 2010).

Integrated and Systemic Approaches

References to early childhood can be found in EU documents across a range of policy areas. The discussion has been led, in recent years, by the Directorate General for Education and Culture (DG EaC). Members of the team at DG EaC have successfully influenced and shaped the discourse and contributed to the now widely accepted notion that in early childhood services, care and education are inseparable (hence ECEC instead of childcare). The shift in the focus of attention from split to integrated approaches to early childhood education was accompanied by the realisation that in order to effect sustainable change policies would have to address all aspects of the early education childhood systems in EU member states. This was first expressed in a DG EaC-led EU Communication in 2011 (European Commission, 2011a) that, with reference to challenges related to the professionalization of the early childhood workforce, called for an end to fragmented projects and qualification initiatives and emphasised the importance of "systemic approaches to professionalization" instead.

The realisation, at policy level, that professionalism in early childhood is more than the sum of formal qualifications of individual practitioners (educators, early childhood teachers, nursery nurses, childcare workers etc.) can be read as an acknowledgement of a body of work on professionalism from within the early childhood academic community that began to question traditional notions of expertise and professionalism from the mid-1990s. New understandings of professionalism as systemic were an important part of this debate (Dalli, 2003, 2007; Dalli, Urban, & Miller, 2011; Miller, Dalli, & Urban, 2012; Oberhuemer, 2005; Urban, 2007a, 2007b, 2008, 2010; Urban & Dalli, 2010, 2012).

Competent Systems in Early Childhood Education and Care

This theoretical debate (see above) and empirical work—e.g. in the "Day in the life of an early years practitioner" project (Miller et al., 2012)—provided the conceptual basis for the project *Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care* (CoRe) (Urban, Vandenbroeck, Van Laere, Lazzari, & Peeters, 2011). The CoRe project was funded by the European Commission, DG EaC. It undertook a critical investigation into understandings and conceptualizations of professional competence of early childhood practitioners across EU member states. The project highlighted the importance of the relationships between actors (individual and collective) and institutions as the key determinant of competence in early childhood professional practice. Drawing on systems theory (Bateson, 2000; Luhmann & Schorr, 1982), theories of governance and complexity going back to Etzioni (1971), and on the above-mentioned reconceptualizations of professionalism as systemic, CoRe developed the

concept of competent system for early childhood education and care: rather than being a characteristic of individual actors (e.g. practitioners), competence unfolds in the relationships between individuals and institutions across all levels of the early childhood system including—which is most important—governance (Urban, Vandenbroeck, Van Laere, Lazzari, & Peeters, 2012). For this to happen, systemic conditions are required. They include a shared frame of reference of knowledge, practices and shared values across all levels of the system.

Since its publication, the concept of *competent system* has received favourable attention at various levels of policy and practice across Europe. Examples include:

- The 2014 EU Quality Framework makes explicit reference to competent systems (Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2014).
- Professional associations and advocacy organisations like DECET (www.decet.org) and ISSA (www.issa.nl) have adopted competent systems as strategic goals.
- At local level, the city of Utrecht, The Netherlands, has developed a municipal quality framework for early childhood services based on the principles of a competent system (City of Utrecht, 2013).
- The German Bertelsmann Foundation is currently funding a national project to investigate and promote a competent systems approach in the German early childhood education system.

Competent Systems beyond the Silos: Learning from and with Latin America

While the concept of competent systems has had (and continues to have) significant impact on early childhood policies and practices in Europe, this impact has remained largely within the limitations of early childhood education and care. The need for systemic approaches is now widely recognised as key to developing the quality of early childhood education, which, in turn, is seen as key to achieving policy goals around social inclusion, poverty reduction, and economic prosperity. While this is an important achievement, it is far from sufficient. First, the emphasis on education (in a narrow sense of formal, pre-primary education focusing on literacy and numeracy) carries the risk of contradicting the more holistic understandings of the nature of (early) learning and development that have only begun to impact EU early childhood policies (yet another example of a paradox of good intentions?). Second, policy areas that are highly significant for the life experience of young children and their families are absent from the picture in the EU policy context. While there is no doubt that early childhood education of good quality is important, it can only unfold its benefits when systemic conditions are met: persistent (and rising) inequality, poor housing conditions, discrimination, and racism, in addition to access to work and public services are all part of the daily lived experience of young children and their families from marginalised communities across Europe. At the policy level, these areas exist in parallel universes with little or no interdepartmental communication, let alone coordination. This is the main systemic deficit of EU policy approaches to tackling marginalisation.

The concept of competent systems has been met with interest in contexts outside of Europe as well (Romero & Torrado, 2013). Latin American countries including Colombia, Uruguay, and Chile are currently developing and introducing ambitious national early childhood policy frameworks. The approaches taken by these countries share a number of fundamental aspects:

They conceptualize early childhood as a public good and public responsibility that needs a commitment to proactive government involvement and coordination, or, as Uruguay puts it, *Compromiso y Responsabilidad de Todos* [Everyone's Commitment and Responsibility]). These frameworks conceptualize education as one of many elements of an integrated early childhood system, e.g. *Atención Integral para la Primera Infancia* [Holistic attention to Early Childhood] in the case of Colombia. These elements include health, nutrition, equality and social cohesion. And, probably the most critical factor for success, all three countries have established high level interdepartmental bodies to coordinate the implementation of the policies. These groups consist of representatives of all relevant government departments, have budget responsibility, and are led at highest level (e.g. by the Office of the President of the Republic, in the case of Colombia). The new integrated policy frameworks in these countries recognise a highly diverse population consisting of a considerable number of ethnic minority groups. They are not specifically aimed at Roma (although Roma, mostly Kalderash, are recognised as an ethnic minority in Colombia, and there are a considerable number of Roma, mostly Xoraxane, living in Chile). However, working in both the European and Latin American context, I am convinced that the experiences made by policy makers and practitioners in Latin America are of utmost importance for the context of working with young children and their families from marginalized Roma communities in Europe (Urban, 2015a). Arguably, twenty years of EU early childhood policies have made little difference to the lives of the most marginalised children and families, and increasingly children are growing up under what we used to call (arrogantly) third world conditions (see my example from Croatia in the introduction). It is now time to radically rethink our approach and learn with and from our colleagues in Latin America and other so-called developing regions of the world.

The future isn't something hidden in a corner. The future is something we build in the present.
Paulo Freire

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Notes

- 1 Cycle of poverty as a concept relates to the effects of poverty experienced by one generation in-creases the likelihood that poverty will be passed down (inherited by) the next. The fundamental flaw of this concept is that it individualises poverty without recognising the structural conditions and inequalities in society that keep families and communities in poverty over generations. Persistent inequality would be a more appropriate concept as it allows exposing the dialectic relationship between cycles of poverty and cycles of advantage or privilege.
- 2 All EU Member States except Malta, which, according to official data, has no Roma population.
- 3 Through the European Social Fund (ESF), the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD).
- 4 While the terms used in the document are not exactly synonymous, I combine them here into a single

figure to show the overall reference to early childhood institutions.

5 The Möbius strip, also called the twisted cylinder, is a one-sided non-orientable surface obtained by cutting a closed band into a single strip, giving one of the two ends thus produced a half twist, and then reattaching the two ends (<http://mathworld.wolfram.com/MoebiusStrip.html>).

6 PHARE is one of several so-called pre-accession instruments funded by the EU. Its purpose was to assist membership candidate countries from Central and Eastern Europe in their preparations to join the EU. It was created in 1989 as the Poland and Hungary: Assistance for Restructuring their Economies (PHARE) programme, and currently covers ten countries. It assists the eight of the ten 2004 accession Member States: the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia, as well as those countries that acceded in 2007 (Bulgaria and Romania), in a period of massive economic restructuring and political change (http://www.europarl.europa.eu/enlargement/briefings/33a1_en.htm).

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